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ABSTRACT

This issue paper examines the pros and cons of required community service, discusses policy rationales and options, defines the difference between community service and service-learning, and presents a snapshot of various practices in place nationally. It is designed to enable education policy makers to make more informed decisions about which of these options, if any, is most appropriate in their state, school district, or school. Cites 37 references, resources, and organizations. (Author/BB)

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Issue Paper

SERVICE-LEARNING

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MANDATORY COMMUNITY SERVICE: CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION or INVOLUNTARY SERVITUDE?

Introduction

A popular topic of conversation lately among parents, educators, policymakers, students and the media is the isolation of young people from their communities. Many people feel schools have a responsibility to build bridges among diverse populations of children and youth, provide nonviolent problem-solving experiences and promote positive activities for young people, even during after-school hours. Involving young people in community service is seen as one potential solution. Indeed, some citizens and educators would like to ensure that all students — including those least likely to participate voluntarily but most likely to benefit from the experience — have the opportunity to help others and contribute to their communities. An increasingly popular way to do this is to require students to complete a certain number of service hours as part of their school experience.

Whether or not students should be required to participate, and what form that participation should take, are the questions most often posed about community service in K-12 education. The answer depends on the intent of the policy. What is the purpose of including service in students' education? What do policymakers and educators want to accomplish?

One goal is to provide students with opportunities to get along with one another, to cooperate and collaborate. A broader goal is to promote civic understanding, participation and citizenship. A third goal is to encourage character education, and a fourth is to advance academic outcomes — grades, school engagement and students' educational aspiration. For some of these purposes, having students participate in community service activities — on their own or as part of a school requirement — may be quite useful. If academic outcomes are desired, however, service-learning — community service experiences integrated with students' academic education — can be a more effective tool.

This *Issue Paper* examines the pros and cons of required community service, discusses policy rationales and options, and presents a snapshot of various practices in place nationally. It is designed to enable education policymakers to make more informed decisions about which of these options, if any, is most appropriate in their state, school district or school.

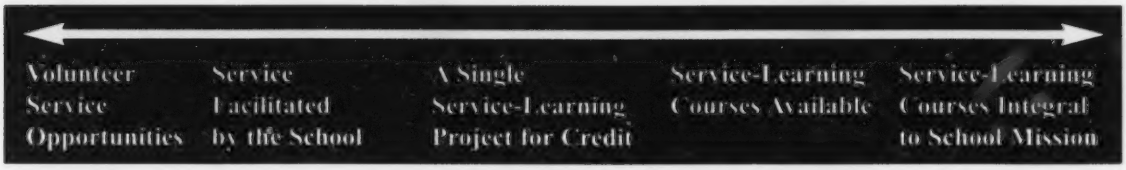
Policy Options — An Overview

Service activities can take a number of forms. The options are as varied as the school districts that implement them, but generally can be defined in terms of the nature of the service activities, the degree of their infusion into the student's education, and whether or not the service activities are mandatory. Beyond these central policy issues, there is variability in implementation, such as where the service takes place (off or on school grounds), when (outside school hours or during school time), who signs off on the hours (school or agency), and how hours are counted and documented.

Many school districts provide community service opportunities that involve a minimal connection with the student's education, rather than being managed exclusively by student clubs or other organizations. Some school districts encourage students to volunteer by providing academic credit for service projects

but without an accompanying curriculum. Twenty-one of the nation's 50 largest school districts offer academic credit for volunteer work, according to a 1998 *Chronicle of Philanthropy* survey. These opportunities range from simple credit-for-service arrangements with no curriculum component to integrated service-learning courses.

The box below shows the continuum of policy options that support service opportunities for students.


Volunteer Service Opportunities
Service Facilitated by the School
A Single Service-Learning Project for Credit
Service-Learning Courses Available
Service-Learning Courses Integral to School Mission

At the far left of the continuum are policies that address service simply in terms of volunteerism — whether on the student's own or facilitated by the school. The progression moves to offering credit for service hours and then to policies that support full integration of service-learning into the school's curriculum and climate. Full integration is done with the express purpose of educating active, engaged citizens who know about the world and their own community, and care about contributing to it.

There is often a clear progression over time in how schools or districts pursue service activities. Many times, a school or district starts with a policy that mandates service hours and then moves toward more service-learning. This type of evolution occurs because the policies on the left of the continuum are easier to plan and implement in terms of logistics (track hours, fill out forms, little to no formal assessment, little monitoring, etc.) and also may be easier to explain to constituents. Moreover, these policies place most of the responsibility for implementation on the student.

By contrast, the service-learning policies on the right-hand side of the continuum are more challenging to implement because they require staff and teacher involvement and place responsibility on the school and/or district to make quality service experiences available for students.

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse reports that 5.5 million high school and middle school students are engaged in service-learning, a growth of 3.663% in high school participation between 1984 and 1997. A wide range of service activities can be used in service-learning, for example, tutoring for

Community Service vs. Service-Learning

What is the difference between community service and service-learning? In community service, a student organization/club may decide to spend a Saturday cleaning up the neighborhood park and adjacent woods. The experience is not related to course curriculum, and the school and the teachers are not involved in planning, organizing or supervising. Students might receive some credit for their involvement or be recognized by the school, but there is no clear-cut connection to classroom activities or assessment. There also is no real follow-up activity such as reflection or community action to maintain the clean neighborhood.

In a service-learning program, students first prepare for their experience by studying the ecology and environment of the area and determining a "real" community need. Teachers, other school administrators and the students develop the curriculum around the problem, determine the site and the work to be done, complete the work and develop a follow-up action plan to maintain the area. Students are assessed on their knowledge of the issue and their participation. Teachers and students take part in reflection activities to understand the importance of their work, evaluate how well they worked together and met their obligations, and discuss the importance of their civic duty and how they grew as individuals. This service activity could be tied to science, speech and/or composition curriculum and to standards adopted by the school.

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literacy — in reading and writing or computer technology; peer mentoring; and social-service and environmental activities in the broader community.

In a district, policy options for student service might look like any one of the following:

- Requiring students to perform a certain number of hours of community service
- Requiring schools to provide students with service opportunities
- Providing particular project-based service requirement(s) for which students receive academic credit
- Offering a required or nonrequired course, such as *Introduction to Service*, in which students learn about the history of service and complete one or more service projects
- Offering a required or nonrequired course in the core curriculum, using service-learning as a method of teaching
- Providing multiple required or nonrequired courses in the core curriculum, using service-learning as a method of teaching, integrating it into the overall school climate, and providing a meaningful curriculum and reflection opportunity
- Offering volunteer service activities organized by student clubs or other school groups, or elsewhere by neighborhood or community-based organizations, with no curriculum component.

What is Service-Learning?

In service-learning, youth are encouraged to take the lead:

- *in responding to **genuine needs** in their school or community they have researched and identified*
- *through **meaningful service***
- *integrated into a **thoughtfully organized curriculum***
- *accompanied by **regular opportunities for reflection***
- *and **making use of partnerships** between school and community.*

The most passionate arguments for and against the various policy options tend to occur over the policies at both extremes on the continuum — mandated hours on one end and service-learning integrated into the school curriculum on the other.

Pros and Cons of Mandatory Service

According to the Institute for Justice, a Washington, D.C.-based law group representing students and their parents in several lawsuits against mandatory service across the country, only about 8% of school districts (fewer than 1,100) require students to complete some form of community service in order to graduate from high school. A recent article in *The San Francisco Chronicle* reports that California school districts listing community service requirements were up from 47 in 1997 to 60 last year. A 1995 survey conducted by the American Alliance for Rights and Responsibilities showed that 25% of students in the 130 largest public school districts must perform some type of community service to graduate. The number of service hours required in these school districts ranges from 40 to 100. Many students can start counting hours performed during middle school and must complete the required number by the end of their senior year in high school.

School districts that require community service for graduation include Atlanta; Cincinnati; Washington, D.C.; Corpus Christi, Texas; and Jefferson Parish, Louisiana. The requirements are not limited to public schools. More than half of the 577 independent schools surveyed by the National Association of Independent Schools require students to perform community service.

In some cases, mandates have forced students not at all interested in volunteering to try it. Those students often discover they enjoy volunteering and benefit almost as much as the people they serve. This revelation is the result most hoped for by mandatory service proponents.

Policy Options — Implementation Examples

While the hourly requirement seems to be the most popular policy for ensuring that students participate in community service, the implementation of other forms, including service-learning, is increasing steadily. At least 23 states and countless school districts have some policy on the books that support youth service or service-learning.

Examples of recent district and state policies requiring community service include the following:

- ***Chicago** — Students must serve at least 40 hours before they can graduate from high school.*
- ***Philadelphia** — Starting in 2002, students must complete a service-learning project to advance from the 4th, 8th or 12th grades. The school district is providing professional development in service-learning methodology for teachers and other staff, as well as other resources necessary for implementing widespread service-learning.*
- ***Minnesota** — Allows districts to levy funds for youth service, raising about $4 million annually for community-based education. The Youth Works Act of 1993 expanded K-12 service-learning programs, restored grant programs for higher education, created a full-time service corps and created a Youth Works Task Force staffed by the Department of Education.*
- ***Maryland** — The first, and only state to require community service for graduation from all public high schools, Maryland requires all students to complete 75 hours of service, including preparation, action and reflection components, prior to graduation.*

"In the last three years, we have graduated more than 125,000 students in Maryland who have taken part in mandated service-learning. These service activities provide students with a valuable understanding of their role in society. As we work to make high school experiences more rigorous and meaningful for students, service-learning provides a critical reality check for each student. Service activities that combine academic material with acts of good citizenship make sense for all students."

— Nancy Grasmick, state superintendent of schools

Proponents of mandatory hours of service argue that the practice has the following benefits:

Arguments in Favor of Mandatory Hours of Service

- Community service is an excellent way to train young people for citizenship by engaging students in active civic participation.
- Service is a way to explore careers and gain work skills.
- All students benefit from the lessons learned through service, and mandating service is the only way to reach those who would never participate voluntarily.
- Participation in community service looks good on a college application.
- Policies requiring community service are fairly easy to implement.
- Community service meets or reduces community needs.
- Service requirements help schools align with standards.
- Public schools require other types of coursework or experiences for graduation, such as math homework or gym classes; therefore, schools can require community service.

Requiring students to do community service has two sides, however. The September 10, 1998, *Chronicle of Philanthropy* article said it best in its headline: "A Lesson in Mandatory Service — Requiring Students To Volunteer Proves To be a Mixed Blessing."

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Some teenagers resent the requirement and end up with a worse attitude toward volunteering than they had before their mandated service experience. One problem may be the type of service that students are asked to do. Students performing mandated service may be relegated to collecting coins tossed into downtown fountains or picking up trash from parks. While these services may be necessary, they are not likely to achieve the goals that proponents of the mandates have in mind, such as building an ethic of service or decreasing young people's isolation from their communities.

Arguments against mandated service vary from the constitutional to the philosophical and practical. Constitutionally, the argument against mandatory service that has received most attention is the one that parents in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, used in a court case against the school district. The parents claimed that mandatory service is a form of involuntary servitude and is unconstitutional under the 13th Amendment, which generally has been interpreted by courts to prohibit coerced labor "akin to African slavery." The U.S. District Court for Eastern Pennsylvania dismissed the lawsuit in April 1992, and in 1997, the U.S. Supreme Court declined for the third time to hear legal challenges by students and their parents.

The term "mandated community service" is also problematic. It is often seen as pejorative and punitive in the public eye because the criminal justice system routinely uses it in sentencing convicted criminals. This problem equates community service with community restitution or even "punishment" for many observers, especially when mandated. Other criticisms of mandatory service include the following:

Arguments Against Mandatory Service

- Mandatory service is "involuntary servitude" and in violation of the 13th Amendment.
- Mandatory service violates the First Amendment right to freedom of religion because schools are trying to impose a certain set of values or a system of nontheistic religion.
- Service that must be completed outside of regular school time may interfere with participation in extracurricular activities, such as sports and music, part-time jobs and traditional homework time.
- Community service requirements are "make work" for young people and do not involve meaningful service experiences.
- "Caring" cannot be mandated.
- Service mandates pose logistical problems in terms of record keeping, transportation and liability insurance.
- Mandating service undermines the sincerity of the many students who already volunteer on their own.
- Mandated service programs place children in danger by sending them into places where adequate supervision is not guaranteed and there is potential for serious harm.

The Case For and Against Service-Learning

Many inspiring anecdotes have emerged around service-learning over recent years, and research is now catching up. Although more research is needed, existing evidence in support of service-learning is compelling. For example, Alan Melchior, deputy director and senior research associate for the Center for Human Resources, Brandeis University, says service-learning fosters school engagement, improved gradepoint averages in math and science, better civic attitudes as measured by social responsibility, increased acceptance of diversity and, for middle school students, a reduction in delinquency.

States and school districts that have opted to adopt policies that involve fully integrated service-learning include the following:

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"There are two essential purposes of public education: to learn (1) how to earn a living and (2) how to live productively within one's community. By teaching academics (reading, writing, math, etc.), we prepare students for these challenges. By integrating service-learning into the curriculum, we empower students to focus their talents for the betterment of the world around them."

— Randy Collins, Waterford Connecticut, superintendent of schools

- **San Diego** — Board of Education policy states the district "supports the integration of service-learning activities with the curriculum to enhance the relevance of their instruction and meet standards in all subject areas."
- **Waterford, Connecticut** — Board of Education policy requires each student to complete 80 hours of community service in the Learning Through Service Program as a requirement for graduation.
- **Hudson Public Schools, Massachusetts** — Committed to integrating community service-learning in all classes and all grade levels to enhance effectiveness of the instructional program. This involves ongoing professional development, collaborative planning, institutionalized teacher leadership and strong administrative support.
- **Vermont** — Incorporated service-learning into 1996 "Civic/Social Responsibility Standards." Students must demonstrate they are "taking an active role in their community."
- **South Carolina** — Includes service-learning as an approved component of the state's 1994 School-to-Work Transition Act.
- **Ohio** — Passed an Opportunities Mandate in 1992 that requires school districts to provide opportunities for students to serve.
- **Kentucky** — 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act includes among its goals the development of a student's ability to "demonstrate effectiveness in community service."
- **California** — A 1998 report of a state service-learning task force contains eight recommendations for infusing service-learning as a teaching and learning strategy into all schools and communities. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin also established two goals for infusing service-learning into state schools:
  - By the year 2000, 25% of California's 994 school districts should offer all students at least one community service or service-learning opportunity at each grade level (kindergarten-grade 5, grades 6-8, grades 9-12).
  - By the year 2004, 50% of California school districts should offer all students at least one service-learning opportunity at each grade level.

Policymakers and educators in these and other districts and states say fully integrating service-learning has the following benefits:

Arguments for Integrating Service-Learning into the School

- Service-learning is associated with positive youth outcomes, including civic engagement, the ethic of service, civic attitudes, a sense of belonging, acceptance of diversity, competence and self-esteem, and protection against risky behavior.
- Service-learning can increase student engagement in school and support academic achievement.
- Service-learning is a more active and experiential form of learning.
- Service-learning engages the community in education.
- Service-learning students provide higher-quality service to the community than those with a simple hours requirement because they are better prepared for the service activities and have the opportunity for structured reflection on the meaning of their service.

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- The 1983 report issued by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching recommended a new "Carnegie unit" in community service as an opportunity for young people "to reach beyond themselves."
- Service-learning can be used as a tool for teaching and learning without a service mandate.
- Service-learning aligns with the civic mission of most K-12 schools.

Reflection: An Invaluable Tool To Maximize Service-Learning

Personal reflection, an integral part of service-learning, can take many forms. Multiple forms of reflection increase what students are able to derive from the experience (Silcox, 1993; see Resources). For example, reflection can:

- **Involve writing in a journal about the problems at hand, the service experience and what was learned**
- **Take place in small-group discussion in which students communicate with one another about their experiences and what they learned**
- **Give students an opportunity to identify community problems and develop plans for how to solve them**
- **Allow students to be active planners, collaborators and decisionmakers, which can be empowering and build competence**
- **Involve students creating portfolios or murals or other presentations about the problem, the people or the issue**
- **Take place at a number of times — both before the service (so as to plan and prepare it), while the service is being done and afterward.**

Opponents, however, argue that service-learning benefits only a few students and has no place in the curriculum.

Arguments Against Integrated Service-Learning

- Service-learning benefits only the students involved, not the communities or populations served.
- Service-learning provides cheap labor for nonprofit organizations, but does not really benefit the students participating.
- Service-learning is an "add-on" and a burden to teachers.
- Service-learning activities may interfere with other academic/classroom learning or things that are perceived as more important, such as reading and math.
- Because service-learning is not a traditional academic subject, it cannot be measured or evaluated for the purpose of college admission.
- Service-learning is only for certain groups of students — either youth at risk or gifted/talented students.
- Service-learning involves logistical challenges, as does an hours-requirement, such as transportation and liability.

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Invitation May Be as Good as a Mandate

Little research exists comparing the relative effectiveness of community service hours and service-learning, but, overall, data show mandating service may be unnecessary. The key to getting students involved may be simply to make opportunities available.

According to a 1996 survey by the Independent Sector, 59% of 12 to 17 year olds reported volunteering over the last 12 months. Half of those students indicated they got involved through their school (the other half through a religious organization). More than half of the teens (51%) said they were asked to volunteer, with almost all (93%) of those doing so. Among teens who were not asked, only 24% actually volunteered. In other words, teens were nearly four times more likely to volunteer if asked than if they were not.

Data from *The Condition of Education 1998,* a compendium of educational statistics published each year by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center on Education Statistics, show that rates of voluntary service in schools that arrange, but do not require, community service activities for their students are almost as high as those that arrange and require volunteer projects. In both kinds of schools, just over half of 6th to 12th graders had spent some time volunteering. Rates were lowest in schools that required community service but did not help place students in an activity, indicating this may be the least effective way of implementing a service policy. Less than one-fifth of students in these schools had served any volunteer hours.

Whatever kinds of service experiences are made available to students, and whatever requirements exist, research strongly suggests that student autonomy is important if students are to internalize the values and attitudes embodied in their education experiences (Deci and Ryan, 1986). In fact, balancing students' needs for autonomy — to make decisions about how to solve problems they identify and to do so actively — with their need to feel a sense of belonging with others in school, appears to enhance the effectiveness of a variety of school-based interventions (Vallerand et al., 1997), including service-learning (Allen et al., 1994). Striking the right balance between these needs in service-learning activities may be more important than the mandatory/voluntary distinction. In addition, whether or not community service or service-learning is mandatory, it may be best promoted as an option and an opportunity that will be fun, as well as relevant to students' lives and education.

Conclusion

Policymakers, administrators and teachers increasingly are asking themselves about the potential value of community service in education, and whether or not it should be part of the required school curriculum. The answer to this question depends on the aims one wishes to foster in involving students in service.

Simply mandating the number of service hours students must complete offers service opportunities, but not necessarily integrated with their learning. If the aim is to cultivate civic awareness and citizenship, foster cooperation and acceptance of diversity, support character education, and enhance academic achievement, engagement and aspiration, then service-learning is the best option because it is known to promote these outcomes. Combining service with learning makes learning relevant to the real world, enhances education and gives students hands-on experience in using their knowledge.

National data suggest, however, that schools do not need to force youth to volunteer in their communities. Rates of voluntary service in schools that arrange, but do not require, community service activities for their students are almost as high as those that arrange and require volunteer projects. If requirements are instituted, they need to be implemented in a way that identifies and arranges service opportunities for students, and invites participation while also helping to make these experiences meaningful and engaging.

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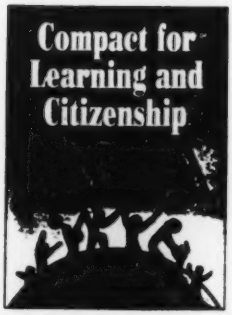
For More Information

The Compact for Learning and Citizenship (CLC) provides K-12 school leaders, legislators and other education stakeholders with resources, profiles and strategies to integrate service-learning through practice and policy. District superintendents and chief state school officers are invited to join. The CLC Web site (www.ecs.org) also provides links to other organizations, clearinghouses and resources. Contact Terry Pickeral, project director, at 303-299-3636 or tpickeral@ecs.org, or Lou Myers, project coordinator, 303-299-3644 or lmyers@ecs.org.



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